Opening Remarks at World Digital Library Reception

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Your excellencies, Director General Matsuura, distinguished colleagues, friends, welcome to this event co-hosted by UNESCO and the Library of Congress, with the support and cooperation of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the national libraries of Brazil, Egypt, and the Russian Federation.

Thank you, Director General Matsuura, for those remarks, and thank you for UNESCO's participation in this project.

A little less than a year ago, Assistant Director General Khan and I joined forces to convene an experts meeting at UNESCO to discuss the proposal by the Library of Congress to develop a World Digital Library. What we had in mind was a large international effort to make available on the Internet, for free, important cultural materials from countries around the world.

At that meeting, we solicited ideas from potential partners in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

In my initial speech to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO proposing such a project, I stated that a World Digital Library "would hold out the promise of bringing people closer together by celebrating the depth and uniqueness of different cultures in a single global undertaking." Many leading figures in the cultural, political, and private sector worlds clearly share this view. Enthusiasm for such a project is high.

On the basis of our discussions at UNESCO last December, we decided to take the first steps toward realizing a World Digital Library. Together with UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, we established working groups to discuss technical standards, best practices, content selection, and other issues.

We reached out to the technology community in universities and private industry. We held bilateral and regional consultations with libraries and other cultural institutions from dozens of countries. We solicited views on a future World Digital Library, as well as sought to learn about other worthwhile digital library projects to identify synergies and avoid duplication.

Finally, and most relevant to this evening's event, we worked with a distinguished group of partner libraries - the National Library of Brazil, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the National Library and Archives of Egypt, the National Library of Russia, and the Russian State Library - to develop the prototype of a World Digital Library.

What you see on the computer screens is the result of this cooperation.

In my view, the key objective of the World Digital Library ought to be to promote international and inter-cultural understanding and awareness. We can pursue this objective by using electronic technologies to give as many people as possible access to important and interesting primary source materials from and about their own and other countries.

Every country, whether large or small, has its cultural treasures, its proud moments, its story that it wants to tell. The World Digital Library should provide a way for us to share these stories -- with each other and with the world as a whole.

In order to tell these stories, we need to do more than just digitize primary materials and post them on the Internet. That is the essential starting point, but it is not enough.

We need to make these materials searchable in multiple languages, and give users the opportunity to hear experts explain why particular documents are important - why they were chosen for inclusion, and what they tell us about a particular time, place, or person.

We need to enlist leading scholars and librarians to assemble "memory packages" that will provide context and bring to life the history of a given country. And we must find ways to meet the expectations of users, particularly younger users, that they should be able to participate in the World Digital Library by offering content and commentary of their own - and not just be passive viewers.

The prototype that you see is not a finished product. Its content does not fully represent all countries and all time periods. But it is a start. It provides multilingual access, and offers content in a variety of formats, including audio and video. It uses comments by curators to explain the content, and offers a notional model of what a "Memory of" package might look like. It provides time-lines, maps, and other tools to facilitate user exploration and experimentation. Taken as a whole, its purpose is to convey the message that all countries have made their contributions to the human achievement, and that exploring these contributions is worthwhile.

In presenting this prototype at the UNESCO General Conference, we have one over-riding purpose: to make clear that the World Digital Library is open to all countries. Accordingly, we welcome your feedback and your participation.

Please take time to explore the workings of the prototype, and give us your ideas and suggestions. This can be done here this evening or at the World Digital Library exhibit at UNESCO headquarters, where you can talk to staff from the partner institutions and see demonstrations.

Going beyond your ideas, we welcome your participation and that of your country's libraries, archives, and museums in the project.

I realize, of course, that to participate effectively, many countries will need to build capacity, both technical and human. That is part of the challenge, and one that we welcome. We cannot promise miracles, but working with UNESCO, other partners, and the private sector, we can help build capacities that will enable all countries to participate more fully in the digital age by both accessing and creating digital content.

In closing, let me again thank UNESCO and our partner libraries, all of whom are represented here. I am grateful for their presence, and for the excellent cooperation in getting us to this point.

We now will hear from the representatives of the five partner institutions with whom we worked in developing this prototype. We will begin with Dr. Vladimir Zaytsev, director of the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. He will be followed by Dr. Rifaat Hilal, Vice Chairman of the National Library and Archives of Egypt. Next will be Dr. Muniz Sodre, Director of the National Library of Brazil, and Dr. Alexander Visly representing the Russian State Library in Moscow. Dr. Ismail Serageldin, director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, will be our concluding speaker.